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This House Believes Oxbridge is a Finishing School for the Privileged

“To deny [the privilege of] sitting in the Union as an Oxbridge student, with better access than other people, is wrong.”

Proposition: Chris McGovern
McGovern began his speech by saying that while it is true that Cambridge students may be intelligent, they often went to excellent schools, which remains significant. Although “things are getting better”, the 60% of state-school students have a 1/100 chance of getting into Oxbridge. McGovern re-framed the public school-state school divide, arguing that public schools and good state schools are on one side of the divide, “bog-standard comprehensives” on the other. The UK is the only country in the developed world where grandparents outperform their grandchildren. Many schools in the UK are failing and, if you are allocated to them, it is an “educational ‘death-row’ sentence.”

Opposition: Rachel Spedding
Spedding responded to McGovern by conceding that the statistics do show the extent of privilege. But she questioned whether this means that everyone is privileged before they arrive at the university. Proposing the motion sends a message that perpetuates the myth that Oxbridge is for the few – it tells people “not to bother” as their “fate is sealed”. An Oxford alumni herself, she was on free-school meals and went to a state school in Merseyside. Then, within three years, she began to be labelled as privileged. Spedding spoke about the culture of Oxbridge and how it creates an environment where it is socially acceptable to set ambitious goals. Concluding, blaming Oxbridge is looking at the symptoms of a greater problem.

Proposition: Stephen Drew
Drew began his speech but confessing at the outset that he, ideally, would want every child to go to their local comprehensive. Drew notes that one cannot deny that we have a problem of social mobility considering that it was the ‘privileged’ Cameron that noted it. Drew notes that it is “fanciful” to deny the extent of privilege considering that fact that 40% of the students went to private schools. Drew notes that of the 6 education ministers in the government, 5 went to private schools: it is hard for them to understand that those that faced educational challenges. To deny that sitting in the Union, as an Oxbridge student, with better access than other people, is a clear manifestation of privilege, is wrong.

Opposition: Barnaby Lenon
Lenon reminded the floor that a finishing school has a specific meaning – it is a school for upper class girls, where they went to finish their preparation for being good, upper-class wives. To equate this with 21st century reality is “preposterous”. The third years do not feel ‘finished’ in any way. Lenon further notes that privilege is also something that is earned. Some people do succeed based on their birth, but most Oxbridge students have middle-income parents. People mainly have got here through hard work and talent.

Proposition: Louise Mensch
Mensch argued that the debaters can talk about background, but the ‘elephant in the room’ is that all previously mentioned arguments are basically in agreement and are in fact disagreeing over semantics. She
argued that the real privilege all in the room had is intelligence. She is grateful to Oxford for bringing her two parents together who otherwise would not have been for socio-economic reasons. There is more to be done but everyone at the Union is privileged and it is not necessarily a bad thing.

**Opposition: Nigel Warburton**

Warburton argued that privilege means, in this context, the economic privilege of parents. Students of economically privileged parents do have a better chance of getting into Oxbridge but that is just one element of the debate. A finishing school does not teach people to be critical thinkers, which is a key element of an Oxbridge education. He also points out that Oxbridge are elite research universities – hence, the researchers at the university are hardly attending Cambridge as a finishing school, something which perhaps can stand more ground at an undergraduate level. He notes that such a suggestion is “absurd” and a “non starter”. If you are going to attend to the words of the motion, he concludes, “I don’t see how you can support this”.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc

See pictures here

http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/search/2/image?family=editorial&assettype=image&artist=chris+williamson&sortBy=best&excludenudity=true